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Multilingual classrooms in times of superdiversity

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Abstract

The present chapter addresses multilingual classrooms and superdiversity. More specifically, we deal with the consequences that a revised understanding of language – based on the concept of language repertoires – has for language education as well as for educators caught in the transition between diversity and superdiversity. After having shown that dealing with multilingualism in regular classrooms, at least in Western Europe, has been a matter of concern for teachers and learners' educational pathways for decades, we move on to review the founding fathers of sociolinguistics and analyze how their seminal work has been used recently to re-evaluate the concept of sociolinguistic repertoires. We then discuss how this concept highlights the fact that education professionals appear to suffer from a 'trained blindness,' mostly focusing on attainment targets and normativity, rather than paying attention to the actual ways in which students use 'language' across formal, non-formal and informal institutional spaces.

Introduction

Dealing with multilingualism in regular classrooms has been a point of concern for teachers right from the start of compulsory education, at least in Western Europe, when children speaking non-standard varieties of the official language (i.e. dialects) came to inhabit classrooms where they were confronted with teachers using the standard variety as a language of instruction (cf. Cheshire et al. 1989). When mainstream educational institutions opened their doors to children that belonged to what were, back then, newer immigrant minority communities, they were immediately confronted with the languages of their newly admitted students and with an array of correlates like limited proficiency in the school language, the presence of ethnic minority languages in schools, low school achievement, discrimination, prejudice, societal disadvantage, remedy measures, and the presence of non-indigenous varieties of the official language (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon 1991). This situation gave rise to a plethora of educational reactions that often were not based on the results of adequate empirical research. One telling example comes from the early language compensation programs in the USA that were deemed to fail as a consequence of their limited understanding of the variability of language as a human resource and an instrument of teaching and learning (cf. Kroon & Vallen 1997). Other examples include the variety of approaches to transitional bilingual education that became an instrument for the production of monolingual children in multilingual classrooms (cf. Van Avermaet & Sierens 2013). One of the main presuppositions of these and similar approaches to language variation in educational contexts was their reliance on a monoglot ideology. That is, they were led by the politically driven, widespread metapragmatic judgment that bilingualism, as well as any form of hybridity in language use, should be regarded as an impediment hindering the educational careers of pupils from immigrant minority backgrounds, resulting in their lagging behind their monolingual peers. Over the decades, however, it has become clear that multilingualism in education and society should instead be considered as a resource, a positive asset for learning and development (Kroon & Vallen 2006). As a consequence of ongoing migration, multilingualism has become a much more multifaceted phenomenon than it was in the early years of bilingual education: dozens of languages have become part and parcel of urban classrooms in the last decades of the 20th century and teachers had to deal with these languages in their regular teaching (cf. the case studies in Gogolin & Kroon 2000 and Bezemer *et al.* 2005). This contribution starts where the previous contribution of Bezemer and Kroon (2008) ended. That is, it is

based on research in regular multilingual and multicultural classrooms. We will show how the monoglot ideology mentioned above has moved from bilingualism and the challenge brought by bilingualism to education, to multilingualism. From there, we will address a new phenomenon, that of superdiversity, and we will draw out the implications that superdiversity holds for education as well as for the ways educators seek to find solutions for combining superdiversity with the normativity that necessarily characterizes (language) education.

Early developments and initial contributors

Our working definition of bilingualism, or rather multilingualism, is one that sees two or more languages or varieties being involved in a communicative exchange in a sociocultural space. Once we examine the relationship between bilingualism – since that is the reduced and manageable form multilingualism is traditionally given in schools – and education, we see that it is complex. In recent decades, we have been confronted with the fact that there are several concerns about bilingualism and the educational wellbeing of pupils. These address its additive or subtractive as well as its balanced or unbalanced nature and the possible lagging behind of bilingual pupils' educational achievement in comparison to their monolingual peers. The common assumption was, and partly still is, that exposure to and engagement in language variation is potentially damaging for pupils' development. John Edwards' (2004) review of the field of bilingualism and his examination of the concerns listed above and of how they have played a role in establishing who is (and who is not) 'bilingual' is still one of the most authoritative publications in the field. His account, anchored in a structuralist understanding of language, shows that much of the concern with bilingualism had to do with generating workable definitions of who is and who is not a bilingual language user and with what a bilingual can and cannot do.

Before Edwards, many engaged with the job of defining and measuring the degree of bilingualism that someone may hold. For instance, Bloomfield (1933) had already observed that bilingualism resulted from the addition of a 'perfectly learned' foreign language to one's. Weinreich (1953) defined bilingualism in a somewhat vaguer fashion. He saw it as a loose alternation of two codes. Dispute over these various definitions ignited a debate on whether someone either could or could not be categorized as bilingual and also raised a question about the degree of competence and performance someone has to have at both individual as well as societal levels in order to be a bilingual. From there, research on bilingualism and education has progressed along two major pathways (cf. Hamers & Blanc 2000 for a comprehensive review). The first engages with the effects of bilingualism for the individual in different domains, while the second engages with the development of meta-linguistic awareness and knowledge in bilingual education and the positive effects bilingualism can have on children's cognitive development.

While research on cognitive development has given way to evidence supporting the inclusion of bilingualism in classrooms, it appears that regular education has nonetheless continued with a bleak view of all that surrounds hybrid forms of linguistic expression and language variation. In fact, there is evidence that bilingualism in education seem to be profitable for students' careers. Such approaches are mainly situated in "experimental" educational contexts (that encourage bilingualism). Positive developments around bilingualism and bilingual education (Cummins 2000) were and still are encountering barriers in regular education, where the shaping of pupils' identities as citizens of a fatherland and speakers of a mother tongue are still seen as part and parcel of a national project (Kroon 2003). We therefore need to reconsider the concept of bilingualism (and multilingualism) as a personal as well as classroom phenomenon.

Major Contributions

The study of language and education and more precisely of language as social practice in educational contexts is much indebted to the work of John Gumperz (1974) and Dell Hymes (1972), who both studied language variation in and outside the classroom and engaged in public debates around bilingualism. It is thanks to Gumperz' work on linguistic relativity, and his later work on *cross-talk*, that sociolinguistics has managed to gain ground in mapping the infrastructure of spoken language in intercultural encounters. On his account, despite the fact that a named language was a category for those who studied language, it had not normally been so for those who were the object of that study, that is, for users of that language. Gumperz focused on communicative practices, functions and repertoires in spoken interactions. For him, an approach to the study of *language* became an approach in which the central question is not how (meta-)linguistic knowledge is structured, but a study in which the core notions are interpretation, understanding and meaning-making in interaction and social communication among language users. Gumperz (1982) developed a sociolinguistic analysis that focused on how interpretation is intertwined with understanding and through that with the construction of shared common ground. Whereas Gumperz' earlier work was linked to the beginnings of sociolinguistics and particularly to the establishment of what became known as the 'ethnography of communication' (Gumperz 1972), the later phase of his work became what is generally referred to as interactional sociolinguistics, and this took a critical stance toward other influential schools of linguistic thinking. The Gumperzian approach to the study of language and society can be summed up as a focus on social interaction through language.

Gumperz' conceptual, intellectual and empirical work should be considered alongside another giant of contemporary sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes. For Hymes, language is formed in, by, and for social, cultural, and political contexts — injustice and social hierarchy on the one hand, and human agency and creativity on the other. There is, for Hymes, nothing "mechanical" about the production and reproduction of texts, cultures or institutions, education being one domain in which he studied this process (cf. Cazden, John & Hymes 1972). What were traditionally understood by structural linguists as different languages could be different language varieties, and what an analysis of language features could do would be to designate or highlight lexical or phonological styles that made up varieties of the same language. Hymes followed a linguistic anthropological tradition, the foundations and assumptions of which have developed in parallel with mainstream sociolinguistics in the Labovian-Fishmanian tradition. In this linguistic anthropological tradition, a gradual deconstruction of the notion of "language" itself happened: "language" as a unified (Chomskyan) concept was "chopped up" and reconfigured, as it were, into a far more layered and fragmented concept of "communication", with forms and functions broader than just the transmission of denotational meaning (e.g. Hymes 1996). Hymes, with his strenuous effort to eradicate inequality in education, elaborated the concept of voice (cf. Juffermans & Van der Aa 2013), which made the discrepancy between form and function in language use a useful analytic tool for understanding the making of inequality in educational contexts and beyond.

Of particular interest here is also the work done around the concept of *language ideologies* since the early 1990s. Building on the Hymesian dichotomy of form and function, scholars started working on how people hold socio-culturally conditioned ideas about language, its usage and its effects within institutions (Silverstein 1979; Kroskrity, Schieffelin & Woolard 1992; Blommaert & Verschueren 1999; Kroskrity 2000). This led to the idea that language use co-occurs with metapragmatic judgments about how and why to use it (Jaffe 1999; Irvine & Gal 2000). Distinctions between language forms – the "variation" of dialectology, for instance – appear to be governed by ideologically mediated

understandings such as those distinguishing “standard” from “dialect” or “sociolect”. In fact, any aspect of linguistic-communicative form can be ideologically configured in such a way that it indexically points towards an aspect of social and cultural structure, and derives meaning from it. The contextually situated deployment of such ideologically mediated variation creates an object far more complex than the established notion of “language” itself: the “total linguistic fact” (Silverstein 1985). This invites a kind of analysis that bypasses the *a priori* assignment of specific sociolinguistic statuses to specific linguistic-communicative resources because such statuses – e.g. the assumption that certain resources are “English”, “standard English” or “standard American English” and the assumptions that the identities of those who use these varieties fall within certain categories – become objects of inquiry in their own right. This calls into question the presupposed stability of “-lingualism”, as in “bi-” or “multi-”, and gives priority to language being understood as a set of empirically observable practices in which “languages”, “codes”, “-lects” and “registers” emerge as the ideological byproduct.

Notwithstanding Gumperz’, Hymes’ and Silverstein’s efforts to bring new sociolinguistic tools for unraveling the intricacies of intercultural encounters taking place in, among others, educational settings, regular education often still denigrates language variation and hybridity, whether in spoken or written form. This aversion to language variation in regular classrooms is well documented in Europe by ethnographic studies dealing with teachers managing their multilingual classroom realities through a monolingual lens or presupposing a monolingual habitus in their approach to the language hybridity of their pupils. In contrast to this dominant monolingual approach taken in most multilingual classrooms, the more recent history at the turn of the century has shown that education could not do away with the incipient growth of a student population that had multilingualism as its *conditio humana*, making language variation, hybridity of oral and written expression inevitable and central features of regular school classrooms. Classrooms with an ever growing number of languages have become education’s daily bread.

Sociolinguistic research across the previous and present century has tried to make a point about regular classrooms as *loci* for and of identity construction as well as *loci* for the nurturing and spreading of stylized heteroglossic speech practices of youngsters with immigrant minority backgrounds. On this topic, a crucial advance in the field of sociolinguistics and education is the research on crossing and stylization in the everyday linguistic practices of youngsters in multi-ethnic Britain by Rampton (1999) – which has been followed by important work including Harris’ (2002) research on language use and new ethnicities in secondary multicultural classrooms, examining the language use of post-diaspora London youth, and also other linguistic ethnography scholars outside the UK such as Jaspers (2005), Spotti (2007, 2008) and Van der Aa (2013). This new sociolinguistic research has shown that, while on the one hand variationist sociolinguistics, as Rampton (2011:2) points out, pays much attention to forms and ideologies, not much attention has been paid to situated interaction. On the other hand, whereas Conversation Analysis pays attention to fine-grained situated interactions, it tends to neglect discourse and ideology. Research that combines attention to stylistic performances and ideological categories has been most promising. Recent research on multilingualism has begun to combine the two perspectives in this way, investigating the ideological categories that are emerging from discourses about multilingualism and education (see Blommaert *et al.* 2012).

A related advance in the study of multilingualism is the one brought into sociolinguistics by the Copenhagen group led by Jørgensen, with the concept of polylinguaging (Jørgensen *et al.* 2011). While developed almost exclusively within the frame of a longitudinal project on urban multilingualism in Copenhagen multiethnic schools, polylinguaging emphasizes the multi-sensory, multi-modal, multi-semiotic and multi-lingual nature at play in the meaning-making process involved in communicative exchanges. This reassessment sees language as only one of the vehicles through which meaning is made and communicated. In interaction, speakers first and foremost use heterogeneous linguistic resources, rather than languages understood as coherent packages. Somewhere along the way

speakers learn that some of these resources are thought to belong together in “languages”. In this sense “languages” can be described as sociocultural constructs (Heller 2007; Makoni & Pennycook 2006). These constructs have a powerful impact on speakers’ sociolinguistic knowledge and the organization of linguistic material, and speakers sometimes juxtapose features from different “languages” in the same interaction. Such polylingual behavior (Jørgensen & Møller 2014) may evolve into recognizable ways of speaking that users may identify with and describe through labels such as ‘street’ or ‘Ghetto’ language or with adjectives such as the “natural” way of speaking, thus essentializing and ideologizing these language forms.

Work in progress

Globalization, according to Blommaert (2010: 13), “is most commonly used as a shorthand for the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations, mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology, and resulting in new patterns of global activity, community organization and culture.” A central dimension in globalization is mobility, especially mobility of human beings. Traditionally, this mobility was restricted to rather fixed groups of people emigrating from one country to another for reasons of poverty, unemployment, war, discrimination and the like, with the aim of improving their own or their children’s living conditions in their new country of residence. According to Vertovec (2007) the profile and nature of migration in Western countries has changed considerably since the 1990s. Taking Great Britain as an example, he shows that over the past decades the nature of immigration “has brought with it a transformative ‘diversification of diversity’ not just in terms of ethnicities and countries of origin, but also with respect to a variety of significant variables that affect where, how, and with whom people live” (Vertovec 2007: 1). Vertovec uses the term ‘super-diversity’ to refer to the outcome of these ongoing demographic, legal, religious and sociological changes that result from globalization. He writes:

“‘Super-diversity’ is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables, including: *country of origin* (comprising a variety of possible subset traits such as ethnicity, language[s], religious tradition, regional and local identities, cultural values and practices), *migration channel* (often related to highly gendered flows, specific social networks and particular labor market niches), and *legal status* (including myriad categories determining a hierarchy of entitlements and restrictions). These variables co-condition integration outcomes along with factors surrounding *migrants’ human capital* (particularly educational background), *access to employment* (which may or may not be in immigrants’ hands), *locality* (related especially to material conditions, but also to other immigrant and ethnic minority presence), and the usually chequered *responses by local authorities, services providers and local residents* (which often tend to function by way of assumptions based on previous experiences with migrants and ethnic minorities).” (Vertovec, 2007: 3; italics in original)

Work on superdiversity provides a refreshing perspective in that it offers a “new way of talking about diversity” (Fanshawe & Sriskandarajah 2010: 33) beyond the structures and constrictions brought by classic multiculturalism (Phillimore 2011). As a representative of post-multiculturalism, superdiversity discourse discards cultural, social and linguistic ‘groupism’ and the old binaries of national culture versus minority cultures, natives versus migrants, and local versus global. Such binary constructs, in fact, too often assume a zero-sum game in which the migrants’ stronger transnational patterns of association imply that the latter is only partially integrated in the local (indigenous) mainstream society

at hand. In contrast, superdiversity discourse hinges heavily on the metaphor of simultaneity, as exemplified for instance in

- a) 'multiple embeddedness' of migrants who, according to Glick-Schiller and Çağlar (2013: 499), form networks of social relations and multiple social fields,
- b) intersectionality, as "the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts (Brah & Phoenix 2004: 76; and see Wessendorf 2010: 28-30), and
- c) scalarity, which in Kell's (2013: 19) sophisticated treatment implies "reading out" both the horizontal links (threads) and the vertical moves (jumps) of the interaction events and meaning-making processes unfolding over time and across spaces.

The metaphor of simultaneity combines the idea of (a) superimposition, nesting, and palimpsest – of earlier and later 'generations' of migrants in particular neighborhoods, for instance (Blommaert 2013) – with the idea of (b) intersection and entanglement – for instance the combination of different codes or idioms carrying different national, class-based or ethnic indexicalities into one 'urban vernacular' (Rampton 2011), whether or not understood as instances of 'polylinguaging' as "the use of features associated with different 'languages'" (Jørgensen *et al.* 2011: 33; see also Creese & Blackledge 2010).

Problems and difficulties

The concept of superdiversity has consequences for our vision of language and language use, and thereby also for language learning and teaching. The switch from a diversity perspective on language teaching that sees language as a simple, countable reality to a vision in which speakers use language to engage in polylingual languaging does not mean that languages and their normativities no longer exist. Blommaert and Backus (2013) propose to use Language with a capital L to refer to these entities. This becomes especially clear in education, where the national standard language of a country in the majority of cases is at the same time the medium of instruction in all school subjects and the target language of what is often erroneously called 'mother tongue education' (cf. Bezemer & Kroon 2008). A main characteristic of the school and its language is normativity. This includes the existence of clear and respected rules about what the legitimate language of education looks like. In urging students to use this legitimate language, schools turn them into members of an ideological linguistic community that overshadows other local or virtual speech communities they could also be part of (Madsen, Karrebaek & Møller 2013).

Apart from linguistic norms, there are also pragmatic norms, i.e., norms that indicate how the language should be used in specific circumstances. In mobile text messaging, for example, it might be fully acceptable to write "w84me" if you want somebody to wait for you, whereas in a written composition in English the use of such utterances or 'supervernacular' (Blommaert 2012), i.e., a new form of semiotic code emerging in the context of technology-driven processes, is likely to lead to a negative teacher evaluation. The same applies to the mixed use of the school language and one or another minority or home language, and even to speaking the school language with too strong a regional or foreign accent. In all these cases, the almost sacrosanct norm of the school language is decisive for the evaluation of students' performance. As a consequence, what in reality is 'nobody's language', i.e., the school language, becomes 'everybody's language' for the purposes of evaluation, testing and sanctioning. In their everyday practice teachers need to face the challenge of deconstructing these ideologically shaped differences. In superdiverse classrooms, students should be engaged in meaning making activities by using all the resources and features available in their linguistic repertoires. More often than not, however, the products of their polylingual languaging practices are

disqualified by teachers because they are considered to be at odds with national educational language norms. How can teachers deal with language diversity in superdiverse classrooms? How can they overcome the predominantly normative perspective on language and language education that they have been taught to adhere to and that they have subsequently made their own, which leads them to disapprove of and discredit non-standard language use? How can they combine this normative perspective with a new vision of language as using all linguistic resources available, irrespective of the language varieties these stem from? How can teacher education play a role here? An important first step would be adopting a different perspective on language, language teaching and language learning.

Future directions

Blommaert and Backus (2013) provide a programmatic perspective on language education in times of superdiversity which addresses many of the questions raised above. They consider learning languages as a matter of developing multilingual repertoires that consist of asymmetrical contextual competences. This language learning takes place in a context of power relationships, i.e., formal education, in which, as a consequence of educational normativity, some varieties are credited and others are discredited. It moreover takes place in different ways – i.e., specific language resources become part of a learner’s repertoire through “a broad range of tactics, technologies and mechanisms” (Blommaert & Backus 2013: 14). The degree to which this happens can differ for each of the languages involved. This implies that there are quite a few different modes of learning languages (or linguistic resources) that lead to different levels and forms of “knowing” a language. Following Corder (1973), who highlighted the importance of the concept of repertoires for every language user, Blommaert and Backus (2013) distinguish: (1) highly formal and patterned *comprehensive language learning* in schools, (2) *specialized language learning* related to specific and specialized skills and resources, e.g., learning academic English, (3) highly informal and ephemeral out-of-school *encounters with language* (e.g., age group slang learning, temporary language learning, single word learning, recognizing language), and (4) *embedded language learning*, i.e., learning a language that can only be used if another language is used as well (e.g., computer technology related English used while speaking Dutch). For each of these types of competence, Blommaert and Backus (2013: 22) distinguish: (1) maximum competence, (2) partial competence, (3) minimal competence, and (4) recognizing competence. Language learning trajectories in superdiversity, and the resulting forms of knowing language, are diverse and primarily based on the actual use of languages in communicative encounters.

This usage-based conceptualization of repertoires reflects the complexity present in superdiverse learning environments, a complexity that often encounters resistance in formal institutions that rely mostly on a ‘trained blindness’ toward what the language user actually does. Teachers, whether in regular education or at work in the field of language qualifications aimed at certifying for the purposes of integration, have to be prepared to function in superdiverse contexts. This includes a change in teachers’ knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding language and language teaching, in order to enable them to find a balance between the educational requirement of normativity and the societal reality of language diversity and polylingual languaging. This approach also asks for a change in the (hidden and explicit) language curriculum that both schools and teacher trainers use. This makes different modes of in- and out-of-school language learning acceptable and enables teachers to guide and monitor these language learning processes and create contexts in which they can flourish. Finally, a change of norms regarding language as a subject and language as a medium of instruction is needed, in order to make it possible for students to learn *in* a language that they know best, even if this language of learning is not the language of teaching and even if the students have only oral proficiency in this language. Needless to say, all these changes would immediately affect existing

nationally embedded, self-evident top-down realities and therefore will be difficult to accomplish. But in the contemporary globalized world they are nonetheless crucial.

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